

Abraham
Lincoln

A SERMON

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Abraham Lincoln

The Typical American

A SERMON

BY

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Preached in the First Methodist Episcopal Church
Plainfield, N. J., February 12, 1905

*Fifty copies printed for private circulation
by Judd Stewart*





Abraham Lincoln---the Typical American



IN our Lord's Gospel by Saint John, fifth chapter, thirty-fifth verse, you may read these words: "He was a burning and a shining light."

Henry Ward Beecher relates that when he visited the Alps his first complete view of Mont Blanc was disappointing. He was near to the mountain, in the Vale of Chamounix, and there were no other heights with which he could compare the giant. But afterward, from a distance, he saw the "Monarch of Mountains" towering in solitary grandeur above all surrounding peaks. Only distance could reveal the true perspective and relative size of the greatest mountain in Europe.

Great men, like great mountains, need distance to be seen and judged truly. Not until judgment has dethroned passion, and reason has disarmed prejudice, are men in a frame of mind to deal justly with the leaders of any age. From the summit of distant years, some men who have loomed large in their day

are seen to be mere foot-hills, while far above them, an unrivaled mountain peak, stands the one man of that age whose name is the chief way-mark of history.

He who was born in a humble Kentucky neighborhood ninety-six years ago to-day, and who had growing power among the men about him until, in 1865, he died, lamented of the world, needed distance for a proper view. In the near vision many criticised him, not a few despised him, but after forty years, he shoulders his way into the sky like a great mountain range, and we cannot look backward over the horizon of our country's history without seeing his stupendous form.

Nearly two thousand books and pamphlets have been published in regard to him, and lest someone may think he is being forgotten, it is well to bear in mind that since the beginning of this twentieth century a hundred new ones have been added to the number. Every month two such, on an average, are dropping from the press; and who shall say that the subject is exhausted or grown stale!

I have chosen this morning to speak of Abraham Lincoln as the typical American. The word "type" is sometimes used to indicate a representative of a class, a common average of the great number to which that unit belongs. Sometimes it is employed to signify a model, after which the others may well pattern themselves and toward which they should aspire. It is in the latter sense that Abraham Lincoln was a typical American,—nay, *the* typical American.

Looking backward over the history of our country, there is but one name that can challenge this place with his, and that is the justly honored name of the "Father of his Country." I

have no words of disparagement for him. It were probably an unwise and thankless task to attempt to divide honors between these two men when the laurels of the world gather about their brows as about the brows of no other men in American history. But Washington was a representative of the aristocratic class; he enjoyed privileges from the first; for his time and for this country, he was fairly well educated; he was socially trained in the best school of Virginia aristocracy; he appeared at his best in society; he was rich,—he died the richest man in America. Abraham Lincoln was born poor and humble; he found it necessary to struggle, and whatever he achieved he achieved as the result of that sterling energy which is the especial characteristic of deserving American youth. Washington is not to be given an inferior place, but Lincoln, to the average boy in this land, is the typical American.

He was a man of prodigious industry. Education and self-support with him went together. There was nobody to meet his expenses and to provide him with even the plainest living while he mastered the rudiments of an education. He must needs toil, and at the same time, study. He read law while he was serving in the Legislature of Illinois; he studied mathematics and Latin while he was practicing law; he employed the spare moments of time in enriching his mind by reading a few of the world's best books; and the result of it was that he was really an educated man. Easy in society he never was. Acquainted with all the canons of literary criticism he certainly was not. Familiar with all the literature of the past, nobody could say that he was. But he was a man whose mind was trained to vigorous, accurate, and successful

thinking; one whose memory was stored with an amazing array of essential facts; one of the most industrious and resourceful men that our country has ever produced.

After he had delivered his celebrated Cooper Institute speech in New York, in February, 1860,—a speech that was listened to by the most eminent men of the city, William Cullen Bryant presiding,—the Executive Committee of the party to which he belonged desired to make that speech a campaign document; but it so abounded with historical and political erudition that they were afraid to give it to the public and base the opening campaign upon it until they had placed it in the hands of one of the most critical experts of the city, so that he might verify all the historical allusions and quotations which Mr. Lincoln had made. The result was that not a single inaccuracy was reported, and the critic found it necessary to spend three long weeks of most diligent investigation in the libraries of the Metropolis that he might see whether or not the stranger from Illinois had told the truth in regard to the earlier history of the struggle for liberty on the part of the men who were determined that our country should not be shackled with a government that must inevitably result in trouble.

Mr. Lincoln did much of his own writing when he was President of the United States. He had a private secretary, of course, and he had a stenographer, though stenography was then in its infancy; but there was much that he would not trust to any other person, and no other President in the history of the country ever did so much with his own right hand. Much of that which was especially confidential he would not allow to be copied by anyone else, but he made a copy himself by manual process; and in this way, twice over, he wrote the

more important documents which bore his signature. He was most untiring in his devotion to all the machinery of the government. No more industrious man ever sat in the presidential chair.

One with a mind undisciplined by superior industry could not have made such profound and lucid speeches as did he. Take for illustration the first few sentences of the speech which he delivered at Springfield, Illinois, on the 17th of June, 1858, on the occasion of his nomination for the United States Senate, when he said:

"If we could know where we are and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do and how to do it. We are now far advanced into the fifth year since a policy was initiated with the avowed object and confident promise of putting an end to slavery agitation. Under the operation of that policy that agitation has not ceased, but has constantly augmented. In my opinion it will not cease until a crisis shall have been reached and passed. 'A house divided against itself cannot stand.' I believe this government cannot endure permanently, half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved,—I do not expect the house to fall; but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction, or its advocates will push it forward till it shall become alike lawful in all the states, old as well as new, North as well as South."

No mind that is not trained and diligent could thus speak. The finish of infinite industry is seen in his two inaugural addresses. Power and tenderness are fitly phrased. Listen to the concluding part of his first appeal to the nation:

"I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and

hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

This man was not only industrious, but unique—as much so in mind as in body, and you all know that there did not seem ever to have been another man like him in physical appearance. He never imitated the processes or achievements of other men. He was content to carve out his own way.

His humor was unique. During his first term in Congress he sat silent in his place almost all the time; but he was not silent in the cloak room, in the committee room, or in the corridors where members gathered for pleasant chat, and soon he came to be known as the greatest story teller in all the Congress of the day; and, it is declared, that never once did he repeat himself. Yet he was not a mere story teller. The person who supposes him to have been a light, frivolous character because he often told humorous incidents and knew how to tell them well, greatly misunderstands him; neither does he understand the psychology of humor. The most humorous men of the world have often been serious men, sad men, and always unique men. The sober seriousness of their lives has found necessary relief and expression in the humor which has sometimes characterized them. Mr. Lincoln at one time made some jest or told some humorous story when news had just been received of a reverse in the field, and a prominent Senator who was with him proceeded to reprove him for so doing, whereupon he replied: "Were it not for this occasional vent, I should die." It was merely a recreation that was necessary on the part of a mind that was so sober and so sorely pressed.

He was unique in his seriousness as well as in his humor.

Those who knew him thoroughly declared him the most serious man they ever saw. There was something not only prophetic but unusual in that inexpressible solemnity with which he went to the bottom of things and grappled with the great problems which he met.

He was a man also of great courage. Like Logan, the chief of the Mingoes, he "never felt fear." The young men who grew up about him soon learned this, and then he became their idol. They who especially worshipped strength and courage were his most willing servitors and friends. But it was not merely as a youth and in his display of physical courage that he gave every man to know he was not afraid. When he was a man, when he was President, the same was true. He always disliked a guard. Many times he risked his life, to the alarm of those who knew him. Secretary Stanton used to insist on sending a military guard with him, when in the summer time he had a cottage just in the suburbs of Washington, but he would frequently, by going earlier, evade the guard, and in this way have the quiet which he sought. The wonder is that he did not suffer harm, but he himself was without fear. He had also a moral courage that never failed for a single moment. No matter whose courage wavered, Mr. Lincoln's never did.

He, like most brave men, was tender, for Bayard Taylor wrote truly when he said:

"The bravest are the tenderest;
The loving are the daring."

When desertions were frequent in the army, on account of the generous bounties which were given, and a man would sometimes desert and go into another part of the country and

re-enlist, each time getting the large bounty, Mr. Lincoln interrogated General Butler as to how it was to be prevented, and he replied: "By vigorously shooting every man who is caught as a deserter until it is found to be a dangerous business." General Butler declares that a saddened, weary look came into the face of the President, the like of which he had never seen, as he replied slowly: "You may be right—probably are so, but God help me, how can I have a butcher's day every Friday in the Army of the Potomac?"

His standing order was to admit to his presence anyone who came to see him in regard to a case involving the death penalty, no matter what Senator or great men were turned away from that particular audience. To Mr. Colfax he said one day: "It makes me rested after a day's hard work if I can find some good excuse for saving a man's life, and I go to bed happy as I think how joyous the signing of my name will make him and his family and his friends."

He was a man of profound convictions. Life to him abounded in obligations. Everything was touched by a moral principle. Concluding his speech at Independence Hall, on his way to the inauguration, he said: "I have said nothing but what I am willing to live by, and in the pleasure of Almighty God, die by."

Speaking once of an eminent statesman, he said: "When a question confronts him, he always and naturally argues it from the standpoint of what is the better policy, although with me my only desire is to know what is right." That was the spirit of President Lincoln.

He was magnanimous. He once declared he would willingly have relieved McClellan's embarrassment and given him

another command if he could have done so with safety to the country. When he appointed Hooker to the command of the Army of the Potomac, he wrote him privately :

"You are ambitious, which, within reasonable bounds, does good rather than harm; but I think that during General Burnside's command of the army you have taken counsel of your ambition, and thwarted him as much as you could, in which you did a great wrong to the country and to a meritorious and honorable brother officer. I have heard, in such a way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the army and the Government needed a dictator. Of course, it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you the command. Only those Generals who gain successes can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship."

Thus over and over, in instances that might be numbered by the hundreds and thousands, he manifested a magnanimity that was ready at all times to place the country first and to put himself and his own preferences and feelings last.

Mr. Lincoln had the prophet's ability to read the signs of the times. No other President ever had half so much advice. It embraced all subjects of public interest, but was mostly centered on the subject of slavery. He hated slavery, but he had sworn to obey the law of the land and he even executed the Fugitive Slave Law, to the infinite displeasure of doctrinaires, who supposed that because he was opposed to slavery he must violate his oath and disregard the law which commanded that the fugitive slave must be returned to his master. In reply to a letter urging him to emancipate the slaves as a war measure, he wrote :

"My paramount object is to save the Union, and I would save it in the shortest way. If I could save the Union without freeing any slaves, I would do it; if I could save it by freeing all the slaves, I would do it; and if I could do it by freeing some and letting others

alone, I would also do that. But I intend no modification of my oft-expressed wish that all men everywhere could be free."

Between those who opposed emancipation and those who favored any means to hasten it he had a hard time. A Quakeress came to him one day, and with an ominous shake of the head and tremor of the voice, declared that she was sent by God to tell him he was raised up for the instant freeing of the slaves, and cited his utterances on the subject of slavery in the years before. Mr. Lincoln told her he had an opinion that if God had put him in the Presidential chair for the purpose of instantly freeing the slaves by executive order, He would have communicated that fact to him and not to her.

He was great among great men. No President ever had a greater cabinet, chosen in large measure from among the strong men of his party who had been rivals for the nomination; but he was the master spirit of the administration. It is true that he allowed much freedom in details to Mr. Stanton, who often took great liberties with him; but there were times when the iron will of the Secretary of War came into conflict with the President's will of steel, and in every question of principle the President won. When Mr. Lincoln had been in office not quite a month, Mr. Seward proceeded to tell him that the administration had no domestic or foreign policy, and that it was time a domestic and foreign policy was announced. He even outlined a plan by which the President should farm out the management of the government, and become a sort of executive clerk and figurehead. But quickly the President gave him to understand that he, Abraham Lincoln, was the head of that administration, and that he was the man in whose hands domestic and foreign policies would rest.

In 1861, General Fremont, who had been the candidate for President of the same party as Mr. Lincoln in 1856, as Commanding General in Missouri, issued a proclamation freeing the slaves in that State. Mr. Lincoln promptly informed him that he had no authority to do so, and that until the President issued the order, no general in the field could give liberty to a slave.

In the spring of 1862, General Hunter, in command of the Department of the South, issued a proclamation freeing the slaves under certain conditions, and the President found it necessary immediately to nullify that proclamation, and to give notice to the generals of the army that they were there for military purposes, and not to assume the functions of the President of the United States and of the various departments of the administration at Washington. He had all the time sympathized with the slaves, but with the vision of a prophet he could see that the time for their freedom was not yet. In the summer of 1862 the mind of the country had so changed that men who at first would have turned against the Government, if Mr. Lincoln had declared that he would free the slaves by executive order, began to clamor for their emancipation, that the enemy might be weakened, and that tardy justice might be done to the enslaved millions. So, at last, Mr. Lincoln declared he promised God on his knees that if He would give victory to the armies that were confronting the foe which had invaded Maryland and threatened Pennsylvania, he would issue the preliminary proclamation of emancipation. He held, and rightly, that to issue such a proclamation at a time when one defeat had followed another, would be a mere fulmination of words. But to issue the proclamation when victory had

come would be to follow the retreating enemy with an effective threat of what was going to be the result if he did not lay down his arms. Thus it came to pass that at a time which the historians declare was the earliest possible moment at which Mr. Lincoln could have safely issued the Emancipation Proclamation, and at a time when it is also declared by critical students of history that it was imperatively necessary, Mr. Lincoln did issue that proclamation, with the result that the Federal arms were immensely strengthened, and the Confederate correspondingly weakened.

Mr. Lincoln was a man of faith. He had faith in men—in individual men, for every man must have faith in individual men if he has faith in the mass of men. He especially had faith in the people as a body. He believed in the plain people. No other man has given so good a definition of the essential idea of republican institutions as “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” That was what he believed to be the ideal government. He knew the many might be temporarily misled, that they might be misinformed, that some of them might be misinformed and misled always; but he knew also that the great mass of the people would sooner or later see the deception and come to the truth. Just before his inauguration he said: “The people, when they rise in behalf of the Union and the liberties of their country, truly it may be said the gates of hell cannot prevail against them.”

He had faith also in the Republic; he believed in this government; he did not think it was temporary; he had an idea that in some way or other it would overcome its difficulties; that all the separations between brethren should by and by be reconciled; that the rupture between the states was only ap-

parent ; that no state had really gone out of the Union ; that the time would come when all the states that sought to go out would resume their place ; and that in the coming years the Union would be more firm and complete than it had ever been. If he had lived to see the days that you and I have seen in the last decade, he would have rejoiced in the realization of his faith and prophecies. The first soldier to fall in the Spanish-American war was from one of the Southern States, and among the most brilliant and successful generals of that conflict were men who had worn the gray in the great struggle between the North and South.

He believed in the ultimate triumph of right. In his Cooper Institute speech in 1860 he said: "Let us have faith that right makes might." Some people say that might makes right, but Abraham Lincoln said: "Let us believe that right makes might, and in that faith let us to the end dare to do our duty as we understand it." He said at another time: "The result is not doubtful. We shall not fail. If we stand firm, we shall not fail. Wise counsels may accelerate or mistakes delay it, but sooner or later the victory is sure to come."

He had faith in God! When our own Bishop Simpson visited Washington, he always, if he had time, went to call upon the President. The head of the nation was never too busy to see him, and usually said to him before he left: "Bishop, you must pray with me." Cabinet Ministers and Senators, and Ambassadors with important business, waited outside the door while the great President and the great Bishop wrestled with God for his blessings upon the arms and the officers of the United States!

On the 14th of May, 1864, in reply to a deputation with

resolutions of sympathy and support from our General Conference, he wrote:

"Nobly sustained as the Government has been by all the churches, I would utter nothing which might in the least appear invidious against any. Yet without this it may be fairly said that the Methodist Episcopal Church, not less devoted than the best, is, by its greater numbers, the most important of all. It is no fault in others that the Methodist Church sends more soldiers to the field, more nurses to the hospital, and more prayers to heaven than any. God bless the Methodist Church—bless all the churches—and blessed be God, who, in our great trial, giveth us the churches."

I have seen the original, and you may read the letter here in fac-simile on this platform this morning.

In a letter to Mrs. Eliza B. Gurney on the 4th of September, 1864, he said:

"The purposes of the Almighty are perfect, and must prevail. * * * * We hoped for a happy termination of this terrible war long before this, but God knew best, and has ruled otherwise. * * * * Surely He intends some great good to follow this mighty convulsion, which no mortal could make and no mortal could stay."

And yet, some little men write that President Lincoln was an infidel!

Someone told him of a widow who had lost five sons in the army, and on the 21st of November, 1864, he wrote to her:

"I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice on the altar of freedom."

On the morning of July 4th, 1863, after announcing the success of the Federal arms at Gettysburg the day before, he said: "For this, he (the President) especially desires that on this day He whose will, not ours, should ever be done, be everywhere remembered and revered with profound gratitude."

Is it strange that as we now search the records of the departments at Washington, we find that with the exception of McKinley, no other President in his correspondence and state papers, so frequently invoked the Divine blessing and recognized God's benevolence.

Mr. Arnold, one of Mr. Lincoln's biographers, thus summarized the great President's religious views: "Belief in the existence of God, in the immortality of the soul, in the Bible as the revelation of God to man, in the efficacy and duty of prayer, in reverence toward the Almighty, and in love and charity to man, was the basis of his religion."

The Honorable Schuyler Colfax, who knew Mr. Lincoln as few men did, said in a widely published address:

"To a clergyman who asked him if he loved his Saviour, he replied, and he was too truthful for us to doubt the declaration: 'When I was first inaugurated, I did not love Him; when God took my son, I was greatly impressed, but still I did not love Him; but when I stood upon the battlefield of Gettysburg, I gave my heart to Christ, and I can now say I do love the Saviour.'"

Saint Paul could not speak any more clearly or emphatically of his experience.

Such was Mr. Lincoln in his life, and when he fell, the human race clothed itself in sackcloth and sat in ashes. More than forty nations sent us messages of sympathy. Their words, collected into a book, make a volume almost as large as this Holy Bible.

Eminent judges before whom he practiced declared him to have been a lawyer of exceptional ability. His speeches are among the classics of our English tongue, and take their place beside those of Everett and Webster, Burke and Chatham.

Montalembert, the celebrated French Academician, com-

mended his style as a model for the imitation of princes. The greatest speech of Edward Everett, the acknowledged primate of American rhetoricians in his day, was his oration at the dedication of the Gettysburg National cemetery; but at the close of Mr. Lincoln's brief address he declared he would willingly exchange his hundred pages for the President's twenty lines.

One of the best military authorities of the time described him as "the ablest strategist of the war." General Longstreet, eminent among Confederate commanders, calls him "the one matchless among forty millions for the peculiar difficulties of the period." General Sherman said: "Of all the men I ever met, he seemed to possess more of the elements of greatness, combined with goodness, than any other." General Grant, after having met nearly all the great rulers of the world, declared him the greatest intellectual force with which he had ever come in contact. Lowell calls him "the first American." Emerson said: "He is the true history of the American people in his time." Emilio Castellar, the eminent Spanish statesman, in an oration before the Cortes, estimated him as "humblest of the humble before his conscience, greatest of the great before history."

The superficial scribblers, who, unable to see greatness in granite, have disparaged his intellect and character, will soon be forgotten,—many of them are forgotten now,—but a reunited country and a federated humanity will never, in all their forward marches, get out of sight of his towering presence. Yet his sublimity was so simple that two words sum up his character,—“great,” and “good.”

“To such a name, for ages long,
To such a name,
Preserve a broad approach of fame,
And ever-ringing avenues of song.”

Wherever his story is told his name shall be a talisman of
the struggling youth

“Who breaks his birth's insidious bar.”

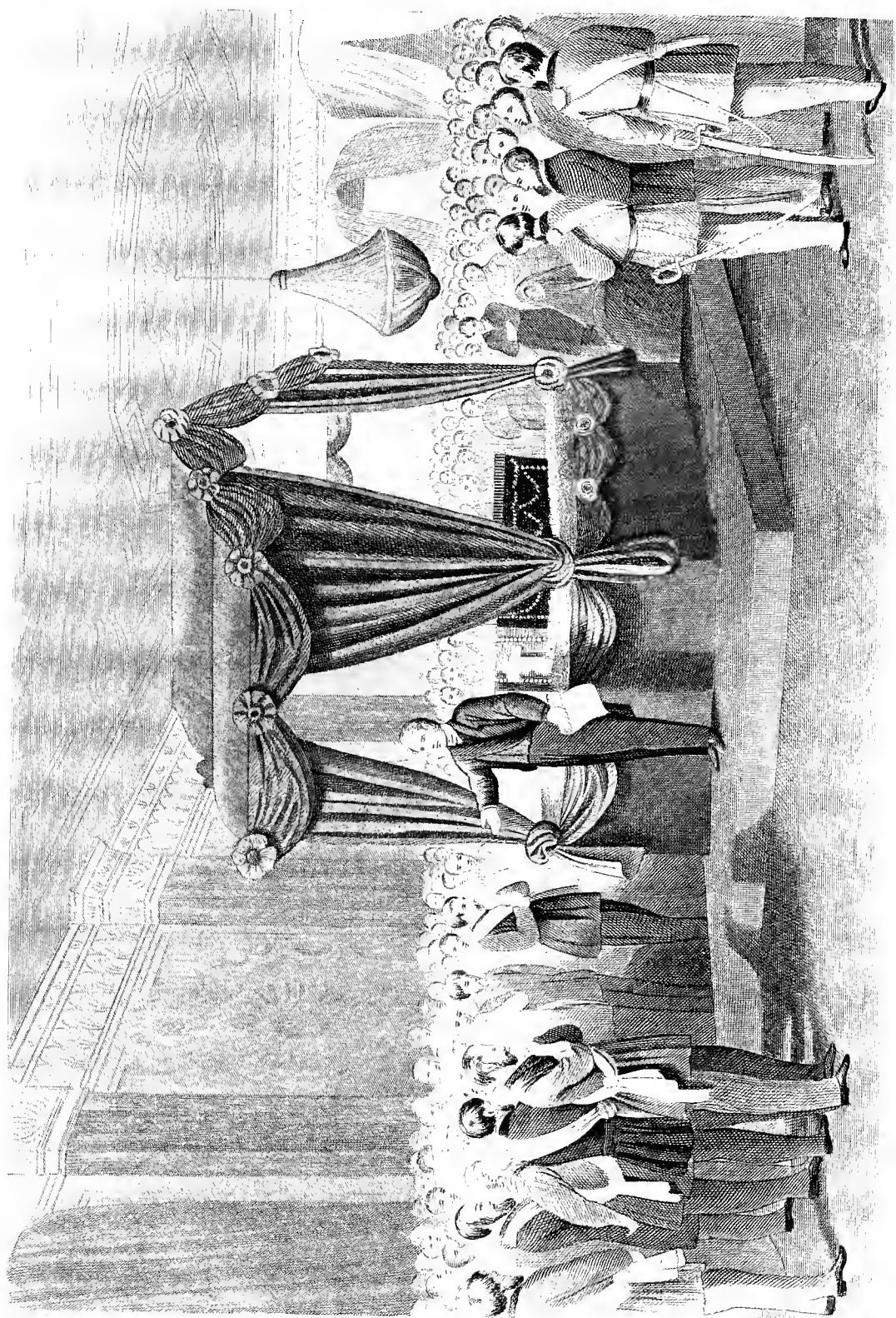
In that great forum in which “the parliament of men”
shall finally cement “the federation of the world” no statue
shall be carved larger or placed higher than that of the poor
boy of Kentucky, the struggling youth of Indiana, the honest
lawyer of Illinois, the illustrious President, whose martyrdom
made mourners throughout the world.

He is not dead. “His body is buried in peace, but his
name liveth forevermore.” His influence shall go marching
down the centuries with colossal stride, for

“Alike are life and death,
When life in death survives,
And the uninterrupted breath
Inspires a thousand lives.

Were a star quenched on high,
For ages would its light,
Still traveling downward from the sky,
Shine on our mortal sight.

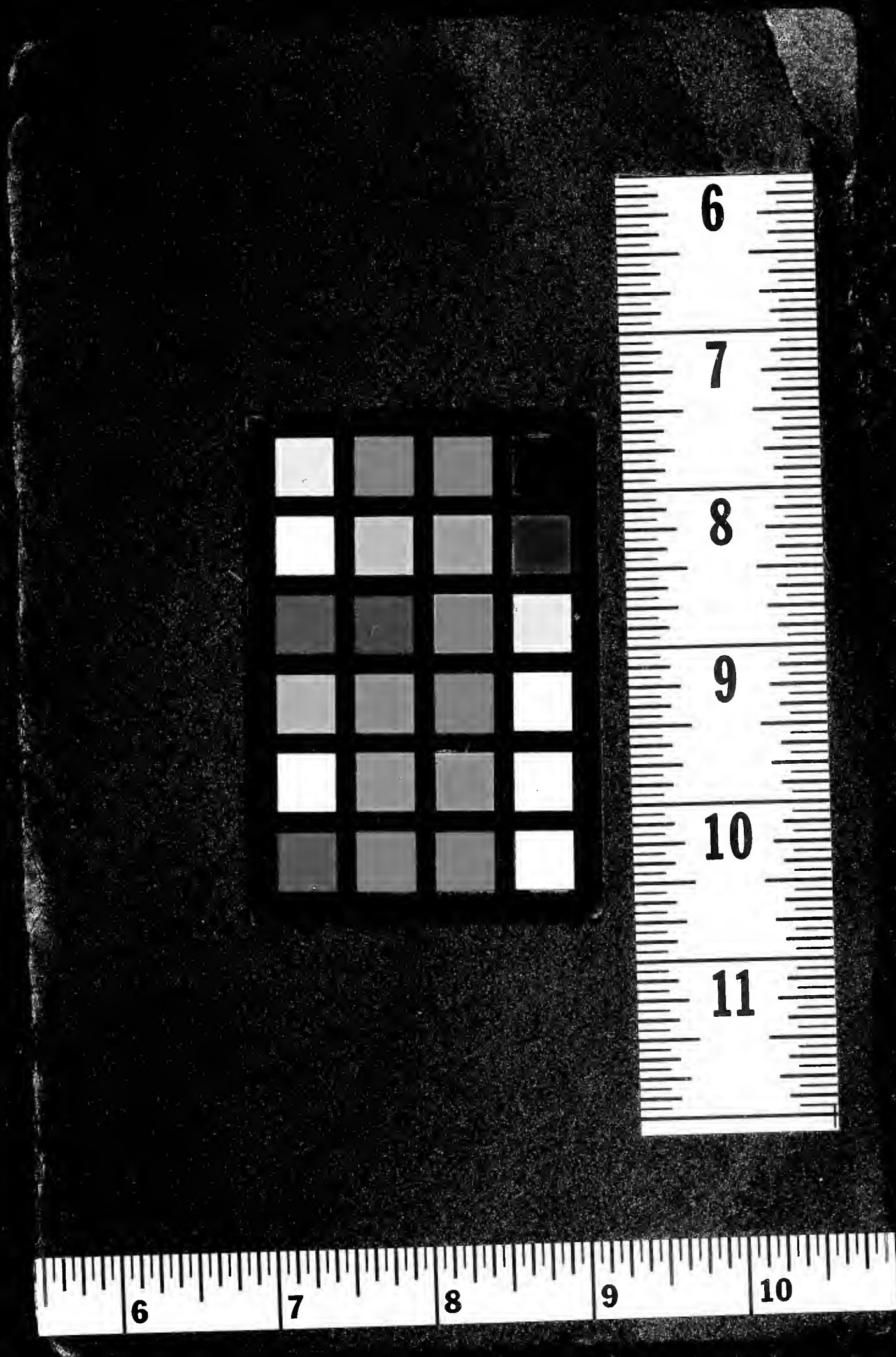
So, when a great man dies,
For years beyond our ken,
The light he leaves behind him lies
Upon the paths of men.”





DEATH OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN.





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